The Scarf
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The Scarf

by LagLemon

Summary

After Ultron's defeat, and Avengers Tower being rebuilt, Steve assumed things would go back to normal - or at least, he hoped they would. Now things have changed, and he's pretty sure he's got a hard decision to make.

Notes

This is a gift for ladykatana4544 for the SteveTonyFest 2015!

See the end of the work for more notes

War played out on many different types of battlefields; it didn't matter what year it was – it felt the same. Sometimes it was fought in the trenches; sometimes it was fought in the jungle, or in the desert. And sometimes, it was fought in the city – or in technology. The playing fields had been different than the first war Steve had fought, but the victory had been the same.

Ultron's defeat had come at a cost, but in Steve's estimation they had been extremely lucky not to lose anyone. The only real casualty had been Avengers Tower, and that, at least, was fixable. Tony took care of everything. Construction on the Tower started *immediately* after Ultron's defeat. Tony didn't wait for the dust to settle, or the cheering to die down. He simply checked in with Steve, made sure repairs were what the team needed, and sent off calls to get things done.

The work had been done blindingly fast. Two weeks had been all that was needed to get the Tower repaired and ready for tenants again. Steve had only just gotten used to the many workpeople wandering through the Tower's halls and then, abruptly, they had disappeared and things had been back to normal – well, as normal as it had been.

Things were still a little tense between the members of the team. Steve had expected that much after everything they had been through. Splitting the team apart had been a poor decision on his part – he could admit that now – and he was lucky that their interpersonal relationships hadn't degraded all that much while they had been apart. Tony though – *Tony* was being a little stranger than normal. The other members of the team – Clint, Thor, Hulk, Natasha and Sam – had been more or less the same since they had drifted back into the Tower and reclaimed their rooms. They had laughed, smiled, and joked around as usual, but Tony hadn't been as the same. Sure, Tony had *smiled* and hung around with them like he had before Ultron's unfortunate appearance, but his smiles didn't quite feel the same; they were strained, and most of the time he looked like he was ready to go face-first into the floor. It didn't sit right with Steve.

Steve had tried giving Tony time; he had watched from afar, spent time in Tony's workshop when he was invited in, and he had made sure that Tony was at all of the team meetings and events, but for some reason things hadn't been getting better. So, despite wanting to give Tony time to figure things out on his own, Steve decided to step in. He didn't want to irritate Tony – or to make it seem like he was prying into Tony's personal life – he just wanted Tony to know that he and the team were worried. He asked Tony out to get a cup of coffee and take a walk. He was tired of screaming at Tony – tired of having to be Captain America all the damn time. For this, he wanted to be Steve Rogers – he wanted to be Tony's friend again. And Steve Rogers was *worried*. Tony had promised that he wouldn't keep secrets anymore, but was that true? Steve sure hoped so.

Steve sighed and slumped against the wall behind him. He checked his watch again, wishing he had more time. Tony would be here in a few minutes, and he still wasn't sure what to say to him. Should he address his concerns right out? Should he wait? Should he let Tony bring it up first? He was a tactician at heart, but that didn't mean he was any good at getting people to talk in a *normal* setting – he wasn't like Natasha. He was good at making small talk, but he wasn't good at starting it. Steve checked his watch again and eyed the Tower's entrance, trying to catch sight of Tony.

The wind picked up; Steve found himself shivering, even though he was bundled up in a thick coat and wearing gloves. He was used to the cold seeping through his clothes, but that didn't mean he liked it.

Tony stepped out of the Tower's entrance wearing a black puffy jacket that came down to his knees. He was carrying a navy coloured box under his arm and had his phone in his hand; he checked it as he walked and was so engrossed in what he was looking at, he nearly walked into Steve. He grinned when he looked up and stuffed his phone in his pocket. "Hey, Steve," he said. "Ready to go?"

"Ready if you are," Steve said, smiling softly. He pushed away from the wall and started walking. Tony looked just as weary today as usual. He no longer had dark bags under his eyes. Steve wondered how he had managed it, considering he had seen Tony at breakfast and the dark bags had been practically drawn on in sharpie then. The smile though, the smile on Tony's face seemed genuine, as though he really was happy to see Steve.

"So," Tony drawled, keeping in step with Steve. "I take it you want to get out of the Tower and take a breather?"

“It’s always nice to take a break,” Steve agreed. “What’s with the box?”

“Here,” Tony said, as they came to a stop for a red light. He held the box out to Steve, grinning widely.

Steve cocked an eyebrow and took the box. “What’s this for?” He opened the box, mindful of the tape and cardboard. Inside, nestled amidst white tissue paper was a scarf; it was half blue and half white. He took off a glove and touched the scarf, unsure of what to do. The scarf was soft – softer than anything Steve had ever felt before in his life.

“It’s for wearing,” Tony said, rolling his eyes. “I noticed you never wear one, and I figured you’re the kind of guy who won’t buy one for yourself, so I got you one.”

Steve sighed. “Tony,” he said.

“Oh *come on*, Cap,” Tony said. He picked the scarf up and slung it around Steve’s neck, tying it gently in a loose knot. “There – see? Nice and *warm*.”

Steve scowled. It *was* pretty warm.

“And look how *good* you look,” Tony said with a wink. “The ladies are going to be chasing you down the street.” He started forwards as the light changed, stepping out with Steve trailing behind him.

Steve gave the scarf a stroke, contemplating whether it would be worth it or not to give it back. Normally he didn’t like getting extravagant gifts – and with Tony, *everything* was extravagant – but the scarf was nice and he hadn’t really had something like this before. He had scarves, of course; he just had a tendency to forget them upstairs in his room. This was the kind of scarf that he would keep in mind when he needed one.

“So,” Tony said as they approached the next corner. “Where are you taking us?”

“I was thinking of going to Morning Grove Coffee,” Steve said.

“You just want one of their apple muffins,” Tony said with a chuckle. “Face it, Cap. I know you too well.”

“Sure you do,” Steve said, smiling softly. “Let’s go grab our coffee before you fall asleep while you’re walking.”

Tony slumped, leaning slightly against Steve’s arm. He shook his head sadly. “How did you know?”

“It’s kind of easy to spot if you know what you’re looking for,” Steve said, putting his arm around Tony’s shoulder. He guided Tony into the small café, sat him down at a table. “Wait here – I’ll get us something to drink.”

“I can pay for it,” Tony said, patting his pockets for his wallet.

Steve patted Tony on the shoulder. “Don’t worry about it. I invited you out, remember? It’s my treat.” He headed for the line before Tony could object. When he got back a few minutes later with two caramel macchiatos in hand, and a box of muffins tucked under his arm, he found that Tony was asleep against the table, snoring softly. He set everything down, thankfully not waking Tony, and set about opening up the box of muffins.

Tony woke with a snort a few minutes later. He blinked and looked around, sniffing the air.

“Awake already?” Steve asked, handing over one of the machiattos.

Tony gave his head a shake and rubbed at his eyes. “Yeah, yeah,” he mumbled. He took a sip and sighed, slumping a little in his chair. “Alright. So what did you bring me here for? I’m assuming I’m in trouble.”

Steve cocked an eyebrow. “Why do you say that?”

“Because the only time we go out to get coffee is when I’ve done something bad,” Tony said, squinting at Steve over his cup.

“That’s not entirely true,” Steve said, sipping his coffee.

Tony snorted.

“I just wanted to go out for coffee,” Steve said. He took a bite of his muffin to keep himself from having to say anything else.

“So what did I do?” Tony asked with a tired sigh.

“You didn’t do anything,” Steve said, swallowing down his mouthful. “Can’t I want to go out to have a cup of coffee with my friend?”

“Steve,” Tony said, “Just tell me what’s wrong.”

“You seem different,” Steve said, reluctantly. He hadn’t wanted to bring anything up this quickly, but now he didn’t have another choice. “You seem kind of off and I was wondering what was wrong.”

Tony stared at Steve, blinking slowly. “Wait, so you’re *not* mad at me?”

“No,” Steve said. “I just wanted to check in and make sure everything was alright.”

“You could have just asked me that at the Tower, Cap,” Tony grumbled. He scooped up Steve’s box of muffins; he took one out and handed the box back, tearing the muffin wrapper off with his teeth. He bit into the muffin and chewed thoughtfully.

“So you’re fine then?” Steve asked, watching Tony eat.

Tony shrugged. “As fine as I can be, all things considered,” he said.

Steve sighed. “Tony.”

“What?” Tony grunted. He set his muffin down in its wrapper on the table in front of him. “Ok. Look – we made a promise about me not keeping secrets, so this is me not keeping secrets. I’m fine, I’m tired but I’m fine. I’ve had a thousand different things to do since Ultron came in and messed everything up, but there is absolutely nothing wrong with me.”

Steve frowned.

“Ok, fine,” Tony said with a frustrated huff. “I haven’t been sleeping all that well because of Ultron – *worrying* about Ultron, not because of something he did – and it’s just catching up with me, alright? I promise I’ve been behaving. I gave you my word Steve and I intend to keep it.”

You said the same thing last time, Steve thought to himself. He kept silent and pushed the muffin towards Tony. “Alright,” he said. “I’m glad to hear that you’re alright – aside from the not sleeping part. You know, if you wanted a few more minutes of shut-eye, you could have just said something this morning.”

Tony picked up his muffin. “I know,” he said. “But I promised the Board at SI that I’d be awake during the day, and I kind of need to be reachable.” He shrugged. “I figured I’d just slap on some concealer and head out like a normal person. I didn’t think I’d have to tell you how tired I was.”

“So that’s what you did, huh?” Steve said, chuckling. “I was wondering how you did it. I was pretty sure photoshop was for images – not people.”

Tony laughed and took a sip of his machiatto.

Two days later, still wearing the scarf Tony had given him, Steve was at a loss. He knew he couldn’t just accept the gift – even if it *had* been given to him in an attempt to butter him up – but didn’t want to give it back, either. The best option was to give Tony a gift in return, but he didn’t know what to get. There had to be something a guy like Tony would like; the only problem was finding it. Steve had tried watching Tony every time he had been in the same room with him, but he still had no ideas. At first, Steve had thought art would be the answer – surely Tony could appreciate some nice, new, art – but then the elevator doors had opened up just before Steve had been able to hand Tony one of his sketches and an army of men and women bearing oil paintings had come traipsing out and *that* idea had gone out the window. If Tony was buying art, what good was a sketch? His artwork wouldn’t look half as good.

Dejected, Steve sat on his couch in his living room and tapped at the paper list in front of him. He had crossed out all of the ideas he had come up with already and it was strange to find that his brain was running on empty.

“Captain Rogers?” Jarvis said, his voice cutting through the silence of the room. “You have a visitor.”

Steve looked up, feeling absolutely drained of energy. He would much rather have curled up in a ball than invite a guest in, but he couldn’t bring himself to tell Jarvis to send the elevator away.

The elevator dinged; Natasha stepped out. She was dressed in casual clothing, wearing a pair of baggy jeans and a long sleeved t-shirt. Her long red hair was tied back in a ponytail. She stalked over to Steve and peered down at the list. “So *this* is what’s keeping you in your room?” she asked.

Steve sighed wearily.

“Who’s the gift for?” Natasha asked.

“Tony,” Steve said. He idly stroked the scarf.

Natasha pursed her lips and looked from the list to the scarf. “So he bought you a thousand dollar scarf and you’re trying to reciprocate?”

Steve nearly choked on his own spit. “A *thousand* dollar scarf?” he sputtered. “*This thing set him back a thousand dollars*?”

“It’s cashmere, Steve,” Natasha said with a dry chuckle.

“Cashmere?” Steve said, his voice cracking. He felt like he was going to faint. When he had been younger, he had heard stories about cashmere scarves and how they had cost some people a year’s wages. Some of the women his mother had worked for would have given their firstborn for a chance at a cashmere scarf. He had been wearing *his* scarf to damn near every place on his morning runs. He had even worn it while eating tacos that afternoon at lunch – he could have dropped something on it.

“Steve?” Natasha said, softly. “*Breathe*.”

Steve took in a sharp breath through his nose.

“If I’d known it was so expensive, I never would have worn it outside,” Steve said through his teeth.

“You wear your suit outside,” Natasha said. She looked like she was having a hard time not laughing at him. “Steve, your Avengers uniform is worth at least fifty thousand dollars – not counting Tony’s designing fees.”

Steve leaned back against the couch. “But that’s different,” he said.

“It’s really not,” Natasha said. She picked up Steve’s list and frowned at it.

“I don’t even *have* a thousand dollars,” Steve said, his voice small. He put his face in his hands. Christ, he hadn’t felt this pathetic in years – not since well before the serum.

“You don’t need to give him something of *equal value*,” Natasha said, setting the paper down again. “Look, I get what you’re feeling, but this is Stark we’re talking about. He doesn’t think about money the same way people like you or I do.” She sat down on the couch beside Steve. “So let’s try thinking about this another way,” she said. “What do you think Stark needs?”

“I don’t know,” Steve said, frowning at his list. Nothing seemed good enough. “He can buy whatever he wants – I don’t know what he needs.”

“Forget that he has money for a minute,” Natasha said. “Let’s pretend that he’s broke and can’t afford anything.”

Steve snorted. “Ok. It’s hard to believe, but I’ll give it a shot.”

“Good,” Natasha said.

“So Tony’s broke,” Steve said, leaning back against the couch. He stared up at the ceiling. “What would be buy if he couldn’t buy something?”

“Exactly,” Natasha said.

“Well,” Steve said, drumming his fingers on his knees, “He’s always itchy.”

“I’ve noticed that too,” Natasha said. “I asked him about it. He said he gets dry skin sometimes when he’s stressed.”

“Maybe I could find him some kind of fancy lotion,” Steve mused. Lotion couldn’t be that expensive, could it? And it was definitely something he could see Tony never buying for himself – if the scratching had anything to say about it. “So where do I get fancy lotion from around here?”

Steve asked, turning to Natasha.

Natasha grinned. “That, I can help you with,” she said.

Steve’s mind was reeling. The lotion store they had just left had left his nostrils filled with flowery scents and his wallet light. He hadn’t thought that a lotion store could be so expensive, but then again, the lotions he was used to were the kind you used only in case of emergency; his mother had rationed the lotion she had bought because the soap at work had left her hands cracked and dry – he had rarely touched it out of fear of using it up. The lotion he had picked out for Tony seemed unnecessarily extravagant.

Natasha gently nudged Steve with her elbow. “There,” she said. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“I suppose it depends on your definition of bad,” Steve said dryly. The paper bag hanging from his hand by an elegantly twisted paper strap felt like it was a barbell; inside it was the biggest tube of honey scented lotion they had been able to find. It had been Steve’s first choice. He knew that Tony was fond of honey. It had been that or something that smelled like a mixture of potpourri and tea, and he knew Tony hated the smell of potpourri.

“I’m sure he’ll love it,” Natasha said.

“I hope so,” Steve said. He stumbled to a halt, nearly dropping his bag. “Tony doesn’t have any allergies, does he?”

Natasha frowned. “I don’t think so,” she said, pulling out her phone. “Jarvis? Does Tony have any allergies?”

“Sir is not allergic to anything according to my information,” Jarvis said, his voice projected from the phone’s speakers.

“What about the people Tony hangs around with?” Steve asked. “Will Tony having lotion on effect anyone else?”

Jarvis fell silent.

“Jarvis?” Steve said.

“Is there a scent that is particularly worrying, Captain?” Jarvis asked.

“I just bought Tony some honey scented lotion,” Steve said. “Don’t tell him that, please – I want it to be a surprise – and I’m worried it might make someone else sick.”

“Ms. Potts is allergic to strawberries,” Jarvis said. “But, according to your debit records, the lotion you have purchased will cause her no problems unless she ingests it which I find highly unlikely. I do not believe Colonel Rhodes has any allergies, so I believe your gift will be acceptable.”

Steve let out a long, satisfied sigh. “Thank you,” he said.

Natasha smiled. “Any other advice for us, Jarvis?”

Jarvis fell silent for a moment and then spoke again. “If you are planning on giving the lotion as a gift to Sir, I would advise either returning home within the hour or waiting for Sir’s return.”

“Is he going somewhere?” Steve asked, adjusting the paper bag’s strap so it wasn’t cutting into his wrist.

“In approximately one hour Sir will have to leave for his private airfield so he can travel to Beijing for business,” Jarvis said. “Shall I pass along a message and have him wait for you?”

Steve felt sweat drip down the side of his face. Did he *want* Tony to wait? He wasn’t even sure lotion was an appropriate gift for a guy to give another fella. It seemed strangely intimate – even if Natasha seemed completely on board with his decision.

“Don’t worry about telling him, Jarvis,” Natasha said. “Steve needs time to think – he’ll get back to you later.”

“Alright. Please let me know if you require further assistance, Agent Romanoff,” Jarvis said. The phone fell silent; Natasha put it away.

“Alright, Captain,” Natasha drawled. She linked arms with Steve. “I bought you a week at tops. You’d better make up your mind before he gets back.”

Steve smiled weakly. “I’ll try.”

“Good – now let’s go look in that game store. I want to see if they have my bobblehead in stock,” Natasha said, tugging Steve across the street.

“You have a bobblehead?” Steve asked.

“You do too – and so does Tony,” Natasha said. “There’s a whole line of Avengers bobbleheads. Let’s just hope they’re there this time. I’ve been checking every time I’m in town, but they’re never in.”

“Couldn’t you just ask Tony or Jarvis to order one for you?” Steve asked.

“And miss out on the enjoyment of the hunt?” Natasha said with a scoff. “Never.”

Steve returned home with Tony’s lotion and a set of Avengers bobbleheads, plus an extra Iron Man one. He planned to give it to Tony, and while he had initially felt ridiculous carrying the toys up to the till, they had amused him and were easily concealed once put in a bag. He took all of his bobbleheads out of their boxes and set them up on the shelf over his dresser. They looked good there – happy, even. Mind you, it was kind of hard to assume plastic, smiling, bobbleheads could be anything *other* than happy, but he liked to think that they enjoyed having a place in his room. He was fairly certain Bucky would have smacked him in the back of the head if he had been around to see them; that thought made him smile.

Now all he had to do was figure out a way to give Tony the lotion and bobblehead without making it weird.

Steve thought long and hard.

A week passed, and he still hadn’t come up with a good enough idea.

Sighing in despair, he walked out into the living room with the lotion and bobblehead wrapped in newspaper. He hadn't been able to find appropriate wrapping paper, so he had picked up the morning newspaper and used it as a last resort. He knew that Tony was going to think he was crazy for doing it, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to waste good paper on something so trivial.

"Jarvis?" Steve asked, clutching his gifts. "When is Tony going to be back?"

"Sir has just arrived at his penthouse," Jarvis said. "Do you wish to have me bring him down here? Or would you prefer to go up?"

"I'll go up," Steve said, grimly. He marched over to the elevator and stepped inside when the doors opened all on their own. "Thanks, Jarvis."

"I'm glad to help," Jarvis said. "Heading to the penthouse now."

Steve had a good thirty seconds to think before the elevator shot up and arrived at the penthouse. He stepped out, plastered on his most friendly smile, and walked out into Tony's living room.

Tony was draped over his loveseat like a discarded jacket. He waved at Steve from his upside down position and slowly slid onto the couch. "How's it going Cap?"

"You look like you've had quite the trip," Steve said, walking around the couch. He set his gifts down on the coffee table and helped Tony sit up.

Tony scowled as he settled against the couch. The dark bags under his eyes were once again front and centre, and his olive-toned skin looked paler than usual; his hair was artfully sculpted, his beard trimmed to perfection. Even when exhausted and two steps away from passing out, Tony Stark looked handsome. Steve tried to push that information away. Now was not the time to be gawking at his friend.

"What's with the newspaper wrapped boxes, Steve?" Tony asked, yawning into his hand.

"Oh, just something I picked up for you," Steve said, hoping he sounded casual.

"You didn't have to do that," Tony said. His eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled down at the boxes. He picked up the first box; it was the smaller of the two and contained the fancy honey scented lotion Steve had purchased. He gently peeled the tape from the newspaper, and set it down on the table, scratching idly at his the side of his neck. He took one look at the lotion and let out a whoop of excitement. He pulled the lotion from the box and started unbuttoning his dress shirt. "Oh god, you bought me lotion," he said, unscrewing the tube of lotion with a look of pure reverence.

Steve's cheeks flushed. He hadn't thought it was *that* big of a deal – it was just lotion, after all.

Tony squeezed a dime sized blob of lotion into his hand and began rubbing it all over his neck. The moan he let out as he began to work it into his skin was downright *filthy*; it sounded like he had his hands down his pants.

Steve's throat went dry.

Tony moaned again. "That feels so *good*," he said, squeezing more lotion onto his hand. He worked it into his skin, his head falling back, his eyelids fluttering. "So, so *good*."

Steve swallowed hard. His pants suddenly felt a lot tighter than they had earlier in the day. Oh shit, he thought, sweat dripping down the back of his neck, oh shit – he had a thing for Tony! He shifted

in place, but he couldn't stop staring as Tony rubbed at his skin. Oh this was bad – this was very, *very* bad.

"Steve?" Tony said, his voice raspy. "You ok over there?"

Steve cleared his throat and shifted his stance again. "I'm fine," he said. His voice didn't break, but it was a very near thing. He hadn't felt like this since he had first laid eyes on Peggy all those years go.

"You seem a little quiet," Tony said. He pulled tugged the sides of his shirt wider apart and started rubbing lotion around the outside of the arc reactor; when he noticed Steve watching him, he shifted a little on the couch, as though suddenly self-conscious, but didn't move out of view.

"I'm fine – just thinking about our next training day," Steve lied, clearing his throat again. "Lots of stuff to do. It's been a while since everyone's been together. We should run some drills – lots and lots of drills."

Tony cocked an eyebrow. "Drills? Now? I just got back," he said.

"I didn't mean right this minute," Steve said quickly. "Just – sometime this week when we all have time."

"Right," Tony said with a sigh. "Back to the grindstone already, huh?"

"Tony," Steve said, his voice going soft. "I'm not trying to rush you back to work. I'm just thinking, that's all."

Tony squeezed a new blob of lotion onto his palm and began to rub it into his neck again; his eyelids fluttered shut. He let out a low, loud moan.

"So uh," Steve said, his voice cracking, "I'm going to head back down to my floor and finish planning – yes. Lots of things to do." He knew he was running, but if he had to stand there listening to Tony moan as he rubbed lotion on himself for any longer he was going to do something embarrassing – possibly to his pants. He ran for the elevator, hoping his haste wouldn't be noticed.

"Steve?" Tony called out. "Where are you going? I still have a gift to unwrap."

Steve smiled nervously. "That's ok – I'm just going to order some dinner – and maybe take a shower. It's good to see you home, Tony."

"Hey," Tony said, standing up. "Order something for me too – I'm starving." He put the cap back onto the lotion and picked up the unopened present from the coffee table. "Wait for me."

Steve thought about jabbing his finger into the door close button. He fought the urge – just barely – and leaned back in the elevator, pressing his back up against the safety rails. "Sure," he said. "That sounds good." He tried frantically to think of a way to encourage Tony to stay up in the penthouse, but by the time the doors opened again on his floor, he realized that his mind had gone completely blank. He stepped out into his floor slowly, looking around desperately to see if he had something that was would be useful as a distraction, but there was nothing to see – he had cleaned that morning, and all of his trinkets and books were neatly put away.

Tony carried his lotion and present over to Steve's couch and flopped down, making himself at home. "So what are you thinking of ordering?" he asked.

"Something greasy," Steve said. He found his tablet where he had left it on his coffee table and

picked it up, quickly flipping its leather, magnetic, cover open.

“Sounds good to me,” Tony said. He carefully peeled the newspaper off of the present and stared down at it. “You got me a bobblehead.”

Steve’s stomach twisted. He grinned, tapping away frantically at his tablet. His message to Natasha was short and simple. *Help me – I think I like Tony and he won’t leave me alone.* He hoped that would be enough to get her attention.

“This is *adorable*,” Tony said, grinning widely. He opened the cardboard box and pulled the bobblehead out, giving its head a gentle tap. “Aww, look at that. That’s priceless.”

Steve’s stomach twisted a little tighter. “They’re pretty cute,” he said. “I’ve got the whole set in my bedroom.” He wanted to slap himself in the face the moment the words left his mouth.

“Oh yeah?” Tony said, waggling his eyebrows.

“Yeah,” Steve said, nodding rapidly. “They’re cute.”

“You said that already,” Tony drawled. He set the bobblehead down on Steve’s coffee table and picked up the tube of lotion again.

The elevator dinged.

Natasha stepped out, looking annoyed. She was dressed in a heavy coat and black boots. “You’re late, Cap,” she said.

Steve stared at her blankly. “I am?”

“We were supposed to be heading out five minutes ago,” Natasha said. “You forgot, didn’t you?” She put her hands on her hips and shook her head. “I can’t believe you forgot.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve said, rubbing the back of his neck. He glanced over at Tony. “I thought I had more time tonight.”

Tony frowned, glancing between Steve and Natasha. “Am I interrupting something?”

“Yes,” Natasha said with a growl. “Chop, chop, Cap. Go get dressed! Jacket, scarf and boots. Go!”

Steve bolted for his bedroom.

“You’re going to have to eat alone tonight, Tony,” Natasha said, her voice muffled by Steve’s bedroom door.

Steve couldn’t hear Tony’s response.

Standing outside in the cold, Steve felt foolish but relieved. Natasha plodded through the snow beside him, trying and failing to keep a straight face. She had been smirking ever since they had stepped out of the Tower’s main doors.

“I’m sorry,” Steve said, ducking his head. “I panicked.”

“I noticed,” Natasha said. She patted Steve’s shoulder. “It’s alright. It happens to the best of us.”

“Tony’s going to be mad if he figures out I begged you to help me out,” Steve said with a sigh.

“He’ll get over it,” Natasha said, shrugging. They rounded the corner and made their way over to the first coffee shop they saw; a Starbucks. It had a long line, but there were a few empty seats in the back by a giant coffee table. Natasha motioned for Steve to sit down and slipped into the line to get them something to drink.

Steve twiddled his thumbs. He wasn’t sure what to do. He didn’t generally flee from things – least of all from people he liked – but he had been too shaken up to stick around. He knew that Tony was hurt – the look on Tony’s face was hard to forget – yet he was certain he had made the right decision. He ran his fingers through his hair and tried to think of a plausible excuse to use the next time he ran into Tony.

Natasha set a cup of hot chocolate down in front of Steve and sat in the chair across from him, clutching a cup of tea. “So,” she said. “You like Tony.”

Steve nodded and picked up his drink.

“And this is a *like-like* kind of thing?” Natasha asked, cocking her head to the side.

“Yes,” Steve said.

“When did you figure that out?”

“Five seconds after he started rubbing the lotion I bought him all over himself,” Steve said. He took a sip of hot chocolate and gave his head a shake. “I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t dragged me out of there. I’m pretty sure I would have jumped off the balcony and made a break for it.”

“Ah I see,” Natasha said. She set her tea down and wiggled out of her jacket, draping it over the back of her chair. She eyed Steve as she picked up her cup. “So is it the *man* part that’s bothering you?”

Steve frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You like Tony. He’s another man,” Natasha said. “Is that the problem?”

Steve quirked a smile. “No,” he said. “That’s not it. I’ve always known I had a thing for men and women.”

“So what’s the matter?” Natasha asked.

“We just got back to being a team,” Steve said.

Natasha sighed. “Alright,” she said. “I get that it would be a bit of a change, but you two are both adults. I’m sure you could figure out how to keep your hands to yourselves while the rest of us are around.”

“Natasha,” Steve said, scowling. “*That’s* not the problem.”

“So you *do* have the ability to keep things PG-13?” Natasha said.

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Or is it that you think *Stark* can’t keep his hands to himself?” Natasha said.

“I don’t even know if Tony likes me like that,” Steve muttered. “How would I know if he’s handsy?”

“He followed you to your place and made himself at home on your couch, Steve,” Natasha said, dryly. “I think he likes you back.”

“He wanted to get something to eat,” Steve said, shaking his head. “That’s all that was.”

“If that’s all it was, then why did you send the SOS then?” Natasha asked.

Steve fell silent. Now that he thought about it, he wasn’t so sure *why* he had called for help. It’s not like he had thrown himself across the couch and given Tony a kiss. He flushed at the thought and focused on his hot chocolate, wishing it would do more than just give him a temporary sugar rush. Things between him and Tony had always kind of been this way – Natasha was right. Tony usually made dirty jokes, and suggested things they could do but it was always in the name of fun. That wasn’t Tony hitting on *him*. That’s just how Tony was when he was around people; Tony joked, and he never meant anything he said. Tony was very clear with what he liked and didn’t like. Steve was fairly certain that Tony would have said something if he did like him.

Steve swirled his hot chocolate. So why *had* he fled? It wasn’t exactly as if slipping into bed with Tony had been an actual *risk*. It was more like he had scared himself. Finding out you liked a close friend was startling; finding out you liked someone who might not like you back was terrifying.

“Steve?” Natasha’s voice was tentative. Steve hadn’t heard her speak that way in the entire time he had known her. He looked up.

Natasha smiled tentatively. “Look,” she said. “It’s a big change. It’s not a bad thing, though.”

“I know,” Steve said with a sigh. He smiled weakly back at her. “I guess I’m still just trying to wrap my head around it. It kind of came out of nowhere.”

Natasha snorted. “Really? You think *this* was out of nowhere?”

Steve narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Natasha said, taking a sip of her tea. “It doesn’t matter. What matters is what you’re planning to do about it.”

Steve sighed again. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out eventually,” Natasha said. “And hey, if you need someone to chaperone, I’m always available.” She smiled and leaned back in her chair. “So, we’ve got at least three hours to kill. What do you want to do?”

Steve chuckled. “I get a choice?”

“The question is a mere formality,” Natasha said, smiling. “We’re going to get dinner and then we’re going to go watch a ballet. I have tickets, and since Hawkeye backed out at the last minute, you’re now my date for the evening.”

“Oh, good,” Steve said. “What are we watching?”

“The tale of the Stone Flower,” Natasha said. “I haven’t seen this one in a few years. I hope they do

it justice."

"I've never been to the ballet before," Steve mused.

"You'll love it," Natasha said, sipping her tea. "And if you don't, well, you'll have time to learn to love it."

Steve was dead on his feet when he got home that night. It was rare that he ever got so tired – normally he had enough energy to say awake until at least three or four in the morning unless he was out fighting super villains all day; he slept two or three hours most nights and never wanted or needed more. He set his coat on the back of a chair in his kitchen and staggered into his living room, barely registering that there were takeout containers sitting on his coffee table and a snoring Tony on his couch.

Tony snorted himself awake.

Steve froze like a deer in headlights, unsure what to do.

"Hey," Tony said, rubbing at his eyes. He sat up slowly and stretched like a cat, letting out a soft grunt as his back cracked. "How was date-night with Natasha?"

"We went out for dinner and saw a ballet," Steve said, slowly, fumbling with the words. "It was nice. I didn't know ballets were so elegant – I mean, I wasn't really dressed properly, but no one seemed to mind."

Tony smiled; it looked forced, as though he had wanted to hear something else. "That's good, Cap. I'm glad you had fun." He gathered up his take-out containers.

"You ate down here?" Steve asked.

"Yeah," Tony said. "I wasn't sure what you guys were doing so I stuck around. I guess I should have just gone back upstairs, but your couch is pretty comfy." He shrugged. "Sorry. I probably shouldn't have left you a mess, huh?"

"That's alright," Steve said. He watched as Tony began plucking individual noodles off of his coffee table, confused by the way Tony seemed so focused on the noodles. It was almost like he was trying not to look at Steve.

"Anyway – you said there was going to be training this week, right?" Tony said, clearing his throat. He dropped the noodles he had collected into the empty take-out container and stood beside the coffee table, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

"Right," Steve said, nodding along. He did have things planned for middle of the week, but he hadn't picked an exact day yet – he had been waiting to see when everyone was available. "How does Wednesday sound?" he asked.

Tony nodded rapidly. "Sounds good," he said. Before Steve could say another word, Tony bolted for the elevator and disappeared inside. He gave Steve a wave and hit the door close button.

Steve stared at the elevator for a good fifteen minutes before he turned around and headed off to bed. It felt like something big had happened, but he couldn't figure out what it was.

Wednesday came and brought all of the Avengers together for training. Sam, Clint, Hulk, Natasha and Thor stood together waiting for Steve to give the first order; Tony stood off to the side in his suit, watching Steve, not moving any closer.

Steve cleared his throat and tried to focus on the Avengers instead of on Tony. There were things to be done, and he needed to stop thinking about how Tony had been suspiciously absent from the Tower for the past three days. “Alright, everyone,” he said. “Group up. We’re going to practice throws and catches.”

Thor grinned broadly. “A worthy assignment, Captain,” he said. “We have been lacking skill in that regard for quite some time.”

“*We*?” Sam said with a snort. “I know I can catch people.”

“Hulk can catch people,” Hulk muttered, crossing his arms over his chest.

Steve sighed. “Hulk, you threw Iron Man into a truck last week,” he said.

Hulk grinned.

“That was not a good thing, buddy,” Tony said.

Hulk scowled.

“Right now, I think we all need to sit down and do some *serious* throws and catches. If we ever get trapped somewhere, surrounded by enemies, we need to be able to count on our teammates to get us out of trouble,” Steve said. “We all need to be able to do both sides – catching and throwing – because while we might not all be able to fly, we might have the opportunity one day.”

“So – who are we pairing off with?” Tony asked, clearing his throat.

“We’re going to rotate,” Steve said. “Grab a partner.”

Sam winced as Hulk grabbed him by the arm. “Hey, big guy. Watch the squishy human limbs.”

Natasha smirked and turned to Thor. “I could use some practice flying with a god,” she said.

Thor grinned and held out a hand; Natasha took it. They soared up into the air.

Clint scowled. “So what am I? Chopped liver?”

“You can practice with Tony,” Steve said, trying not to laugh.

“What about you, Cap?” Tony asked, stepping away from the wall.

“I’m fine with spectating for a few rounds,” Steve said. He clapped his hands. “Let’s get going everyone!”

After a slow start, the team began to move in sync, tossing each other through the air and catching each other after. Some of the catches were less than spectacular; Sam ended up being caught head

first in Hulk's hands after one particularly high toss, and while he had managed to compensate for it with the clever use of his wings, the position did not look comfortable. Natasha and Thor moved up above the others gracefully; every time Thor tossed her, she flipped and found her way back into his arms – to Thor's delight.

Clint and Tony, on the other hand, looked like they would have rather been throwing and catching chainsaws. No matter how many times Tony tossed Clint in the air, he never seemed to be able to catch him without grabbing him by his uniform.

"Come on, Stark," Clint growled, dangling from Tony's hand by the shoulder of his uniform. "Pay attention before you drop me on my ass. If you break me, you bought me."

"Yeah, yeah," Tony grumbled, hoisting Clint up so Clint could stand on his jetboots.

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose. Today was going to be a long day – he was sure of it.

Tony approached Steve after training was over, idly watching Natasha and the rest of the Avengers as they chatted on the other side of the room. He looked nervous. He cleared his throat and stepped out the suit, sending it away. "So," he said, clearing his throat. "I guess that went well."

"We've got a lot to learn," Steve said, smiling tiredly, "but yeah. I'd say it went well. No one got dropped on their head, and I'm pretty sure we improved our aim at by at *least* twenty percent collectively."

"Very true," Tony said. "But between you and me, some people – *Clint* – deserved to get dropped once or twice."

"Tony," Steve said, trying not to laugh.

"I know, I know," Tony said, rolling his eyes. "No dropping teammates on purpose. I got that part – it was a good lesson."

"Right," Steve said, quirking a smile.

"So, uh, I noticed that you and Natasha weren't partnering up today," Tony said. "Trouble in paradise?"

Steve frowned. "What?"

"You guys were all chummy earlier," Tony said. "I mean, it's none of my business who you go out with – I just figured you'd be paired up today."

Steve blinked slowly, processing Tony's words. *Chummy? Go out with?* What was Tony talking about?

"Sorry," Tony said, quickly. "I'm butting in. I'll keep my mouth shut. I promise, Cap." He thumped Steve on the shoulder. "See you at dinner. I'm assuming we're still having our team order-in feast?"

"As far as I know," Steve said.

"Good, good," Tony said. "See you then." He then proceeded to jog from the room.

Steve watched Tony go, trying to ignore the way Tony's pants seemed to sinfully hug the curves of

his ass; he gave his head a shake and turned to face the training room where the other Avengers were still gathered. It was fine – Tony usually left early because he had SI business to deal with. Tony hadn't run off – even though, *technically*, he had run off.

Natasha gave Sam a pat on the back and walked over to Steve. "So," she said. "I see Tony's talking to you again. That's a good sign."

"Possibly," Steve said.

"Possibly?" Natasha cocked an eyebrow.

"I think he's under the impression that you and I are dating," Steve said.

Natasha frowned. "You're kidding."

"Sadly, no," Steve said. "I think he's serious."

Natasha let out a weary sigh. "Well, Stark's going to think what he wants until you tell him otherwise."

"So what do you think I should do? Should I track him down and talk to him about it now?" Steve asked. He *really* didn't want to get into a discussion with Tony about who he may or may not be dating, but if it was the only way to get Tony to stop thinking that he and Natasha were dating, then he was going to have to bite the bullet and do it.

"I say leave it for now," Natasha drawled. She grabbed Steve by the arm. "Let's go plan dinner." She led him towards the elevator. "And if you want, you can smile and act like you're really happy. Stark might get jealous."

"He's not going to get jealous," Steve grumbled.

"Sure Cap," Natasha said. "Whatever you say."

Steve returned to his floor so he could grab his sketchbook and pencils from his coffee table. He still had a few hours until their team dinner, and he had plenty of time to kill now that their massive order had been placed with the three different restaurants they always ordered from. He stiffened, readying himself for battle before relaxing when he realized that he wasn't seeing a stranger. There, standing in Steve's bathroom, staring at Steve's shower like it was an exhibit at an art gallery, was Tony.

Steve leaned against the bathroom doorway and cleared his throat.

Tony's head whipped around. "Oh, hey Steve," he said, quickly.

"What are you doing here?" Steve asked.

"Oh, just checking out an anomaly Jarvis noted in the plumbing. It seems alright to me – I might have to recalibrate his sensors," Tony said.

"Oh?" Steve said.

"Yes, Captain Rogers," Jarvis said. "I will have to undergo some routine recalibrations later in the

evening. It shouldn't take long." The AI sounded wearier than Steve had ever heard him before. It was almost like he was *tired*, although Steve was fairly certain that wasn't possible.

Tony grinned. "So," he said, glancing back at Steve's shower. "I see you're a bar-of-soap-and-nothing-else kind of guy."

Steve shrugged. "What can I say? I stick with what I'm used to."

"You don't have *shampoo*, Steve," Tony said. "How can you *not* have shampoo in your shower?"

"I have shampoo," Steve said. "I just don't keep it in the shower stall because it gets musty." He walked over to the sink and pointed at the container of Garnier Fructose Sleek and Shine shampoo sitting beside his toothbrush. He hadn't picked it out – that had been Clint's doing – but he liked it all the same.

Tony squinted at Steve's sink. "You don't have conditioner."

"What's conditioner?" Steve asked. He had heard Clint mention it a few times in passing, but he hadn't found the time to look it up.

Tony stared at Steve as though he had started speaking an alien language. "You don't know what conditioner is?"

Steve sighed. "I'm assuming its important then?"

"Of *course* conditioner's important," Tony insisted. He practically lunged at Steve and, to Steve's surprise, ran his fingers through Steve's hair. He stared in awe at Steve's hair, his chest now almost pressed up against Steve's. "Oh dear *god*. You have super serum *hair*?"

"I do?" Steve's neck felt hot. He tried not to think too much about how Tony was busy stroking his head like he was someone important – someone worthy of Tony's attention and affection. People had stroked his head before. Natasha had petted his hair – and so had Clint. Everyone seemed to think his hair was nicer than average, but he had no clue what they were talking about. It didn't feel any different than it had before the serum.

"That's unfair," Tony grumbled, still stroking Steve's hair. "How is this fair? You should be all sweaty and nasty from training! Did you take a shower?" He squinted at Steve suspiciously.

"I just got back to my room," Steve said. "I did not take a stealth shower, Stark."

"Unfair," Tony said. He seemed to realize what he was doing and took a step back from Steve; he turned his attention to the sink and the bottle of shampoo. He picked it up and *glared* at it, seemingly offended by its mere existence.

"Are you finished?" Steve asked with a chuckle.

"Yes," Tony muttered darkly. "For now." He set the shampoo bottle down on the counter. "You know there are a bunch of things you could use in the shower you know." He waggled his eyebrows.

"Oh?" Steve asked. He tried and failed to keep his mind out of the gutter; hopefully, he reasoned, rubbing at the back of his neck to try and mask the pink hue that was creeping up to his neck, Tony wasn't a mind reader. He herded Tony out of the bathroom and shooed him into the living room, where it was easier to think.

“I should make you a list,” Tony said. His eyes lit up. “Alright – uh, see you at dinner, Cap.” He sauntered off into the elevator, which opened just before he got to it, and vanished inside before Steve could even say goodbye.

Steve sighed and hung his head. He was going to have to get a better grip on himself. He had no chance with Tony – Tony was straight, and uninterested. So what if Tony had petted his hair and gotten awfully close? Tony was affectionate with *everyone* – it was just Tony, being Tony. He walked over to the couch and picked up his discarded sketchbook. He had been planning on sketching upstairs, but now he was starting to think it was a better idea to stay down here on his floor. He needed time to think, and it would be easier to do when no one else was around to distract him. He grabbed a pencil and opened the sketchbook up.

Tony was acting strange during dinner. Steve couldn’t put his finger on it, but it felt like Tony was following him around. Everywhere he turned, after every dish he scooped food from – somehow, Tony was always there a few feet away, watching him. The attention was unnerving. It worried Steve a little. Did Tony know that Steve had feelings for him? Had he figured it out somehow? It was awfully strange to have Tony so close all the time, and while they had often sat side by side during dinners before, this time it felt different.

Steve tried to keep calm. He put on a smile, chatted with Sam and Clint, pretending he didn’t notice Tony’s constant gaze. He managed to catch Natasha’s a few times but he couldn’t get her attention for more than a few seconds – not with Thor and Hulk trying to get her to agree with them about who had the strongest punch.

When dinner was done, and dessert finished, Steve made a break for his floor, wishing everyone a good night. He slumped in the elevator after the doors closed and hung off the safety railing until he arrived at his floor, feeling exhausted and shaky.

“Thanks, Jarvis,” Steve said as he stepped onto his floor.

“Not a problem, Captain,” Jarvis said. “My apologies for the earlier inconvenience.”

“That’s alright,” Steve said. “Better to have it happen now than when we’re in trouble.”

“Very true,” Jarvis said. “Good night, Captain.”

“Goodnight Jarvis.”

Steve stumbled into his bathroom. He stripped out of his clothes and tossed them out through the bathroom door onto the couch before shutting the door behind him. He was glad that Jarvis could control the shower and that it had pre-set temperature controls; right now, he didn’t feel much like thinking. He leaned against the shower wall as hot water sprayed down on him and let out a sigh.

He was going to have to talk with Tony if things got any stranger. He had had unrequited crushes for most of his teenage and adult life – he could deal with this. It wasn’t hard to bury things away – he just needed to know that there was no hope.

Steve nearly brained himself on the side of his glass shower when the bathroom door flew open. Startled, he stuck his head out the door, pulling the sliding door open and came face to face with Tony.

Tony was clutching a wooden basket to his chest; in it, piled high, were different types of soaps, shampoos and something that looked like a multi-coloured dish cleaning scraper dangling from a

strap. “Hey, Steve,” he said, mostly out of breath. “You started early.”

Steve stared at Tony, flabbergasted. “I’m taking a shower,” he said, feeling silly for saying it aloud.

“Obviously,” Tony said, nodding towards the shower. “That glass does nothing to shield your dignity, by the way.”

Steve’s face felt like it was on fire. Normally he wasn’t too concerned about people seeing him naked; he had been in the army, after all, and had taken his share of cold, group, showers. But this was Tony – this was Tony and it wasn’t some kind of emergency shower. This was Tony standing in his bathroom while he was taking a *shower*-shower – the kind most people did in relative privacy. He gaped at Tony, unable to get words out.

“So this is conditioner,” Tony said, balancing the basket against his hip. He held a bottle out to Steve. “You going to take it, or what?”

Steve yelped when the water pressure changed ever-so-slightly; the beating water on his lower back was starting to make things increasingly uncomfortable.

“And this,” Tony said, oblivious to Steve’s internal struggle, “this is bodywash. You use it with this thing right here. This is a body pouf.” He held up the strange curled thing Steve had assumed was supposed to be used on dishes. “You squirt bodywash on it and use it to make lather. It’s good at scraping dead skin off.”

“Tony?” Steve said, his voice hoarse.

“Yep?” Tony said, digging through the basket with his free hand.

“You’re in my bathroom while I am naked in my shower,” Steve said.

“Uh, yeah. I can kind of see the whole naked part,” Tony said. “Am I embarrassing you? Because I can totally strip down and get naked too if that’ll make you feel better.”

“Please don’t do that,” Steve said, trying to hide his groin behind the metal framing for the shower stall. “Look – It’s a nice thought, but I really don’t need all of this stuff.”

“Oh but you do,” Tony said. He slid the fabric loop attached to the bath pouf over his hand and onto his wrist and went back to digging through the basket. “There’s some really good organic soap here – no chemicals – and some really nice smelling body polish.”

“Tony,” Steve hissed.

“What?” Tony said, finally looking up.

“Out!” Steve said, pointing a dripping finger at the bathroom door.

“Out?” Tony repeated, sounding confused. “What do you mean?”

“I mean get out!” Steve said. “I’m in the shower!”

“But,” Tony said.

“Do not mention butts to me right now, Tony,” Steve said, closing the glass shower stall door. He turned his back to the door and took in a deep breath, trying to stay calm. He hadn’t panicked like this in years; he hadn’t panicked like this when he had been fending off *mortar rounds.*

“I’ll wait in the living room,” Tony said, setting the basket down on the floor.

“Alright,” Steve said, his voice high pitched, nearly shrill.

The bathroom door shut with a click.

Steve slid down the bathroom door and sat on the floor, letting water cascade over him. He reached up and turned the tap to cold with a grimace. At least that would take care of one problem.

Steve stepped out of his bathroom with a towel wrapped tightly around his waist. He deeply regretted not bringing clothing into the bathroom with him, but there was nothing he could do about it now. He looked around and found Tony sitting on the couch closest to the elevator.

Tony looked wary. “Hey,” he said, clearing his throat.

“Let me put on some clothes and then we’ll talk,” Steve said. He strode into his bedroom and close the door before throwing himself at the pile of laundry stacked on his bed. It was a good thing he hadn’t put any of it away yet. He chose the baggiest t-shirt and sweat pants he owned and dressed quickly. He took a moment, while standing in front of the bedroom door, to calm down. Now was not the time to yell. Yes, he was irritated, and Tony had kicked privacy out a window, but there was no reason to scream at him; Tony looked like he knew what he had done was wrong, after all.

Steve opened the bedroom door.

Tony was nowhere to be found.

Tony was gone. The genius had seemingly vanished; even Pepper Potts and Colonel Rhodes, Tony’s two best friends, had no idea where he was, and when Steve contacted them about Tony’s disappearance, they seemed genuinely worried. Jarvis was the only one who seemed to know where Tony was, but he wasn’t talking. The AI seemed quieter than usual, but he still answered every one of Steve’s questions with whatever information he had been allowed to give.

Steve was worried. He paced his floor when he wasn’t in the gym, and spent all of his free time wondering what had gone so wrong. Had he said something horrible? Had he been cruel? He hadn’t thought he had been, but it was possible he had said something to chase Tony away.

Natasha looked up from the book she was reading when Steve made his fifth trip around his couch. “Are you finished?” she asked.

Steve sighed. “I don’t know.”

“It’s not your fault, you know,” Natasha said, setting her book down. “He runs. He has a habit of running when things get too complicated for him.”

“I don’t get how it happened,” Steve said, shaking his head. “One minute he was in my bathroom trying to teach me how to use body wash and the next he was gone.”

“He fled from your bathroom?” Natasha asked.

“No,” Steve admitted. “I told him to get *out* of the bathroom and he said he’d wait in the living room for me to finish showering.”

“And what did you say to him?”

“I told him that we’d talk when I was dressed,” Steve said.

Natasha winced.

“Is that bad?” Steve asked.

“It’s not bad, but it’s not good,” Natasha said. “I don’t know what to tell you. He’ll probably come home in a few days. Who knows? Maybe he’s been called away on business?”

“Business that Pepper doesn’t know about?” Steve shook his head. “No. I’m thinking he left on his own.”

“If you want my advice, you should probably wait for him to come back to you,” Natasha said.

“I figured as much,” Steve said. He sat down on the couch beside Natasha. “I wasn’t mad at him – I just wanted to talk to him.”

“He doesn’t handle failure very well, remember?” Natasha drawled. She picked up her book again. “Leave him be and if he doesn’t keep in contact with Jarvis, *then* get worried.”

“Alright,” Steve said. He twiddled his thumbs.

“And no more pacing,” Natasha warned Steve. “I get tired just watching you, and you’re wearing a track in the carpet.”

Steve slumped against the couch and hoped that Tony would be home soon.

The presents started showing up a day later. Steve found one sitting on his coffee table in the middle of the night. He had no idea how Tony had managed to get it into his room without waking him. He unwrapped the gift carefully, not sure what to expect. There underneath the wrapping paper was a new pair of boots for his Captain America uniform. Steve sighed and put the boots down. “You know,” he said to no one in particular, “I’d rather have Tony back than a pair of new boots.”

The next day there was a quart of pistachio ice cream in Steve’s freezer; Steve had no idea how long it had been there, but since there was no ice on top of the lid, it must have been relatively new. He scooped himself a bowl and sat down on the couch, wondering if he was ever going to see Tony again.

The day after the ice cream’s mysterious appearance, a stack of sketchbooks and art supplies appeared on Steve’s kitchen table. Steve took one look at it and decided that there was only one way to make this end quickly. If Tony wasn’t going to reappear on his own, he was going to have to draw him out. Tony seemed to think gift-giving was a good way to apologize, so he decided to follow in Tony’s footsteps. He put on a coat, called Natasha for backup and went shopping.

Steve looked down at the sweater. It was perfect; a combination of expensive and unexpected.

Tony wouldn't buy something like this for himself – this would be a welcome gift. Or at least, Steve hoped it would be. Natasha had helped him pick it out. They had spent hours looking for the perfect fit, and with Jarvis' help, they had found it. Now all that remained was getting it to Tony. Natasha suggested leaving it somewhere in Tony's workshop, but Steve felt that was too personal – too intimate an act. He hadn't been in Tony's workshop alone before; it would be strange to go in there when Tony wasn't around. So instead, Steve wrapped the sweater and left it sitting on Tony's coffee table in the penthouse. When he was ready for it, Tony would find it there.

Steve wasn't sure why he had picked the sweater; he knew only that he had chosen it because it was a gift Tony couldn't rub sensually all over himself. Well, he supposed idly, making sure the gift was seated in the very middle of the table, Tony could choose to rub the sweater all over himself if he really wanted to, but Steve doubted it would cause the same problems the lotion had.

Steve walked out of Tony's penthouse and returned to his floor. If he was lucky, Tony would be home soon and they could talk for real.

Two days passed. Tony did not reappear, although he had been home at some point. The present was suspiciously absent from the coffee table.

Three days later, Tony walked into Steve's apartment, scratching at the back of his neck. He was wearing the sweater Steve had bought him, and he looked like hell. His skin was pale and the bags that had been around his eyes before were now back with a vengeance. He smiled tentatively at Steve. "Hey, Cap."

Steve set his mug of coffee down on the coffee table. He wasn't surprised to see Tony; Jarvis had told him that he was coming. He had been waiting for Tony to show up again but in all honesty, he hadn't expected to see Tony so soon.

"So uh," Tony said, clearing his throat. "I guess we should talk."

"That's probably a good idea," Steve said.

Tony sat down on the couch, keeping a good foot of distance in between them.

"I got your gifts," Steve said, carefully. "They were very nice – unnecessary, but nice."

Tony looked down at his hands, his mouth twisted in a grimace. "Great," he said.

"Tony," Steve said. "You can't fix this by showering me with gifts."

"So there *is* something wrong," Tony muttered. "Natasha said there was nothing wrong – she said you guys were just friends, but obviously she was full of shit."

"What? That's not true – You talked to Natasha?" Steve said. "Why did you talk to Natasha?" Why hadn't Natasha said anything?

"I wanted to clarify some things about you two, but obviously she lied to me," Tony muttered darkly.

"What did she say to you?"

“She said you two weren’t dating.”

“We’re not.”

“So then what’s wrong? I don’t understand what’s going on, Steve,” Tony said. He rubbed his face and let out a frustrated huff.

“Ok. Look. We promised when we reformed the Avengers that we wouldn’t keep secrets from each other, right?” Steve said. A strange calm descended upon him. This was the conversation he had meant to say weeks ago. This would fix things – this would make things better. He didn’t want to hurt Tony and if he had, he needed to make sure that he repaired the damage as soon as possible.

Tony looked up sharply.

“This isn’t something bad,” Steve said. “It’s nothing you’ve done, Tony. This is my problem.”

“Problem? What problem?” Tony said, slowly. He scratched at his neck, his gaze locked on Steve.

“When I gave you that lotion, I didn’t really think it through,” Steve said, softly.

Tony stiffened.

“I’m not saying I *shouldn’t* have given it to you,” Steve said, picking his words carefully. “I’m saying, I probably shouldn’t have picked a gift you could rub all over yourself.”

Tony frowned. “What?”

“When I saw you rubbing lotion all over yourself – making those noises – I realized I might have had feelings for you,” Steve said, his voice strained. “And I understand that it’s not your problem – it’s my problem. I didn’t want to say anything, but when you showed up in my bathroom while I was showering, those feelings made things kind of difficult for me so I need to say something now before it makes things – why are you scratching?” Steve narrowed his eyes and watched at Tony tried to get his hand out from under the sweater.

“I’m itchy,” Tony said, irritably. “It happens.”

“But I bought you that lotion,” Steve said.

“And I’ve been using it,” Tony said with a grunt. “What’s your point?”

“But why are you still scratching?” Steve asked. He leaned forwards without thinking and put his hand on Tony’s shoulder. The sweater’s fabric was rough under his hand – rougher than he had realized. Oh dear god. It was the *sweater* – the sweater was making Tony itchy! This was his fault!

“Steve,” Tony said, quickly, wrapping his arms around himself. “I’m fine. I’m just a little itchy, that’s all.”

“Is it the sweater?” Steve asked, softly.

Tony shook his head. “It’s not the sweater – it’s oh for Pete’s sake, stop looking at me like that. Ok,” he said. “Fine. It’s a *little* bit of the sweater’s fault, but that doesn’t mean anything. I’m used to things being itchy.”

“How long have you been wearing it?” Steve asked. He put his face in his hands and took in a sharp breath.

Tony scowled. “I put it on a few days ago,” he said.

“So is it the lotion then?” Steve asked. His stomach felt like it was trying to make itself into a pretzel. He should have thought about things first – he shouldn’t have handed the lotion over so quickly – or the sweater. Why hadn’t he thought things through? Bucky would have known what to do – what to say. God he missed having Bucky around to keep him out of trouble. This was an absolute disaster of an apology!

“It’s not the lotion,” Tony grumbled. “It’s just the sweater, alright? It’s the sweater. It’s itchy as fuck – there. Happy?”

“No,” Steve said, pulling away.

“Steve,” Tony said, his voice pleading, “It’s not a *bad* sweater.”

“Take it off,” Steve said, crossing his arms over his chest. “If it’s making you itchy, take it off.”

“No!” Tony said, looking horrified. “It’s mine. You can’t just take it back.”

“I’m not taking it back,” Steve said, startled. Why would Tony think he was going to take it back? Was that why he had kept wearing it? “I just want to see what it’s done to you,” he said.

“Well I don’t want to take it off,” Tony said.

“If it’s making you itchy, it’s probably making you itchy all over,” Steve reasoned.

Tony twitched. “You’re not wrong,” he said.

“Ok,” Steve said. “So let’s go get your lotion then.” He stood up slowly.

Tony watched Steve warily as he stood. “So you’re *not* taking it back?”

“I’m not taking it back,” Steve said. “Not unless you want to exchange it for another sweater that *isn’t* made out of sandpaper.”

Tony smiled softly. “I’ll think about it.”

They stepped out of the elevator and into Tony’s penthouse. Tony scratched at himself whenever he thought Steve wasn’t looking, but for some reason he seemed unwilling to take the sweater off. He shuffled off to the couch and sat down with a groan.

“Where’s your lotion?” Steve asked, hovering behind the couch.

“It’s in the kitchen, on the counter,” Tony said.

“Alright,” Steve said. “I’m going to go get it. Stay right there.”

When Steve returned with the squeeze bottle of lotion in hand he found Tony trying to scratch at his back; it wasn’t working very well. Tony’s tongue was sticking out of the corner of his mouth and he was twisted in a way that didn’t look entirely comfortable.

Steve sat down on the couch. “Take off the sweater,” he said, trying not to laugh.

Tony sighed. He pulled the sweater up over his head with reluctance, setting the sweater down on his lap. He folded it, making it into a square and then set it on the couch cushion beside him, far away from Steve's reach. "Hand over the lotion, Cap. I can do this myself."

Steve stared at Tony's chest. There were red patches of skin and bumps marring Tony's skin, along with scratch marks, and while the scratches didn't look too bad – some didn't look all the recent either – it was still quite the shock. He hadn't known a sweater could cause that kind of trouble.

Tony wiggled his fingers. "Hand over the lotion, Cap."

"It's Steve, remember?" Steve said. "And I can do it if you want."

Tony pursed his lips. "I'd really rather you didn't."

Steve swallowed around a lump in his throat. He handed the lotion over without protest. Of course Tony didn't want him helping – that made perfect sense. He should have realized that instead of offering.

Tony sighed and opened the flip cap on the lotion. He looked up at Steve and then stopped what he was doing. "Ok – seriously. Stop looking like that."

"Looking like what?" Steve said, trying to keep a smile plastered on his face. If Tony didn't feel comfortable with him touching him, then he didn't feel comfortable; he wasn't going to force Tony into anything.

"You look like I just told you I'm dying," Tony said, dryly.

Steve frowned.

"I'm not," Tony said quickly.

"You better not be," Steve grumbled.

Tony smiled. He handed the lotion over. "Fine. You've convinced me. Rub away."

"Are you sure?" Steve asked.

"I'm sure," Tony said.

Steve smiled and squeezed a handful of lotion onto his hand as Tony turned around so he could have access to his back. The skin on Tony's back was red, but didn't have as many scratch marks. Clearly, he hadn't been able to reach here – or at least not often. Steve started rubbing lotion onto Tony's back.

Tony's relief was almost instantaneous. He let out what was the lewdest sound Steve had ever heard and leaned back into Steve's touch.

Steve focused on Tony's back, trying to block out the sounds Tony was making. It was hard, but eventually, he managed to pretend that it was like a cat purring – not something particularly erotic, just a sound of pure, unadulterated happiness. He squeezed more lotion onto his hand and went back to work, focusing on a particularly red patch of skin on Tony's left shoulder.

"Did you actually like the scarf?" Tony asked. His voice was a little slurred. He leaned back into Steve's touch, as though needing more contact.

"I love the scarf," Steve said.

“You do?” Tony turned slightly. His pupils were blown, and he was smiling again, wider and brighter than before.

“Of course I love it,” Steve said, following a particularly nasty scratch across Tony’s shoulder blade with his hand. “It’s a great scarf.”

“You don’t wear it anymore though,” Tony said.

“I don’t wear it because I’m afraid I’m going to get food all over it,” Steve said dryly.

“Natasha told you how much it cost, didn’t she?” Tony said, his voice going soft.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Steve said.

“I should have told her not to say anything,” Tony said. He turned around, sitting with one leg draped over the side of the couch and his other knee pressed up against Steve’s. “I have a question – and I mean, if don’t want to, you can say no. It’s fine – totally fine.”

Steve cocked an eyebrow. He squirted more lotion into his hands and pressed them to Tony’s chest, on opposite sides of the arc reactor. Tony shivered under his touch.

“Ask away,” Steve said.

“Do you want to maybe sometime go out and get dinner with me?” Tony said.

Steve froze. “What?”

“Its fine – if you’re not interested, I get it,” Tony said, laughing weakly.

“I’m not saying I’m not interested,” Steve said, slowly.

“Ok, well it’s just that, Rhodey told me to just outright hit on you so you’d see I was serious and if you’re not interested that’s fine,” Tony said, looking over Steve’s shoulder at the wall behind him. He cleared his throat. “I mean, I kind of keep trying to say something and you just keep smiling at me and ignoring it. So if you’re not interested, that’s fine.”

“I’m interested – I’m very interested,” Steve said. He rubbed his hand up Tony’s chest, smearing lotion over a patch of dry skin.

Tony grinned. “Really?”

“Really,” Steve said. “We promised no secrets, right?”

“Right,” Tony said, nodding vigorously. “You’re absolutely right.” He looked down at Steve’s hands and smiled harder. “Ok. So dinner tonight?”

“On one condition,” Steve said.

“Anything,” Tony said.

“If I get you any more gifts that itch like hell, tell me about it,” Steve said. “I don’t want to hurt you – and I don’t want you suffering just because you think it’s worth it.”

Tony grinned widely. “I think I can do that.” He shifted closer. “I have a condition of my own.”

“Sounds fair,” Steve said, grinning back.

“Wear the scarf even if you’re afraid of getting stuff on it,” Tony said.

Steve sighed. “I guess I can do that.”

“If you get something on it, we’ll send it my drycleaner,” Tony said, leaning even closer so his nose was almost touching Steve’s. “Believe me. I have lots of experience getting strange stains out of expensive clothing.”

Steve felt his face flush as Tony kissed him. Unsure of where to put his hands, he kept them on Tony’s chest and continued to rub circles on Tony’s dry skin as he returned the kiss.

Tony pulled away slowly. “I hope that was ok.”

“That was more than ok,” Steve said, his voice pitched low.

“Good,” Tony said. He turned around. “Now get rubbing. My back is driving me crazy.”

Steve let out a laugh and squeezed more lotion into his hands.

End Notes

Let me know if there is anything funky I need to fix!

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